"It seems to be some kind of an accident": Joint sense-making and categorising possible threats in UN Military Observer training

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In order to make good and informed decisions, it is important to have as full an understanding as possible of the current situation, especially when a wrong decision can cost one not only their own but also their colleagues' lives. The present study takes place in the context of a course which trains military officers of various nationalities to serve in UN peacekeeping operations as unarmed military observers (UNMO). The focus of the study is on cases where teams of trainees on the course are taking part in a car-patrolling exercise, where they encounter simulated, 'life-threatening' incidents, in which roughly half of the teams 'suffer casualties'. By studying video-recorded interactions inside and around the patrol cars, I use conversation analysis (CA) to examine what happens between the first noticing of an incident and the jointly agreed, or at least 'not-resisted', decision regarding what their next action should be, and how the trainees work together to form a categorization of the situation. CA is a qualitative, data-driven research method tightly based on empirical observations made in audio and/or video recordings of naturally occurring interactions. It is used for studying participants' talk and bodily conduct, such as gaze and gestures, and how social interaction unfolds in real time, turn by turn. In other words, CA can show how talk and action lead to next actions and, consequently, how different ways of interacting lead to different outcomes. The audio-video recordings were recorded either with fixed action video cameras (GoPro) mounted on the dashboard of the car, or by a researcher sitting in the back seat with a hand-held video camera.

When teams approach the incidents, the team members first need to figure out what the things they see are designed to represent in order to act accordingly. The incidents along the exercise route can be roughly divided into three categories:

1) Something to investigate and report on; no immediate danger to the team members but possibly to others,
2) Something to act upon; no immediate danger to the team members but possibly to others, and
3) Something to observe from afar, report and call for help; the team members are in danger themselves.

The studied cases (11 teams in total) are drawn from an incident where the teams encounter a mine accident, in which a UN peacekeeper patrol has driven their car into a minefield and gotten injured in the explosion. The incident can be placed in category 3), thus posing an imminent danger to the team. The incident is designed to be sudden and hard to anticipate, and requires quick thinking, knowledge of the correct procedures, and good communication between the trainees. At the same time, though, it is not unambiguous to the trainees what the setup is supposed to simulate, and in order to negotiate and initiate the correct next action, the trainees first need to make sense of what the simulated scene represents.

The participants' categorisations are crucial for the outcome of the situation – that is, whether the team comes out of the situation unharmed – as an incorrect interpretation of the simulated scene often leads to action that puts the team in danger. The data shows, for example, how certain phrases in the trainees' conversations – such as "traffic accident involving UN", "it seems to be some kind of accident", and "they need help again" – indicate that the speaker treats the scene as a first aid task and thus projects first aid as the relevant next action. When a team jointly treats the incident as a

category 2) incident, instead of category 3), they get close to the victims to provide help, which then leads to more casualties. Mobility is also an issue that affects the sense-making work. The teams who survived without casualties where those who kept their distance to the incident site and took their time to make more observations on which they based their assessment of the situation. Recurrently in these cases, one of the other team members – most often the team leader – tells the driver to stop after the initial noticing of the incident. If the driver does not immediately comply, the directive is upgraded by either increasing its pitch and volume, by repeating it multiple times, or both, until the driver stops the car. Observations made from a static car were more comprehensive than those made from a moving car, and thus more often lead to a successful outcome.

The results of the study can be used in identifying good interactional practices that can be included as part of crisis management training, as well as to inform the future development and planning of course exercises. Furthermore, video-based empirical findings can bring new understanding to the course instructors and organisers on how the trainees communicate and cooperate with each other when they are working independently as a team, and are also more reliable in providing an accurate depiction on what happened than the participants' own recounts of the events. All in all, having a better understanding of and providing empirical findings on how different interactional practices shape and affect action and joint decision-making in the context of a training exercise can improve military observer training and, consequently, help create a safer working environment for UNMOs in real operations.